

Non-conventional vs. Conventional Career Paths

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Can a Marine officer have a successful career at the junior officer level and still not be promoted in the future? Captain Smith finished a successful five-year tour in the operating forces as a CH-46E pilot. His multiple deployments included several "floats" with a Marine expeditionary unit and combat tours in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. While in the fleet, he obtained every flight leadership designation and instructor qualification and accumulated over 1700 flight hours. Senior aviators and peers would consider him to be extremely qualified. Captain Smith would like to apply for the prestigious presidential helicopter squadron, HMX-1. He is currently due for review by board for promotion to major. Smith knows that HMX-1 has more majors than a fleet squadron and his chances for a department head tour are slim. Guidance from senior officers and the career counselor tell him HMX-1 is not a good idea because it may stall his career, leaving him a terminal major. Smith meets or exceeds the standards and requirements, wants to apply, and has proven himself to be in the top twenty percent of his peer group, why should he not apply. As he considers his career options he asks himself, "Should I do what I want to do and risk not being selected for lieutenant colonel down the road, or keep on a conventional career path? In the end does it matter?

Current career progression for high potential officers who choose specialized or non-conventional career paths must be re-assessed because the requirements limit their career opportunities and create potential manning dilemmas for these special areas.

Background (high potential / tough screening requirements)

Many career choices are available for high potential Marine officers, such as foreign area officer (FAO) / regional area officer (RAO), special education program (SEP), and Marine special operations command (MARSOC). Additional opportunities specific for aviators: HMX-1, foreign exchange flight programs, transitions/conversions, and test pilot school. These few examples are considered specialized, or non-conventional in regards to career progression. Most of these opportunities are announced by Marine Corps Administrative Message (MARADMIN), and are "board selected". All of these specialized / non-conventional programs have requirements that must be met for selection. The requirements are usually attributes of a high performance officer such as experience, competence, character, judgment, and leadership.

Specialized / non-conventional programs requirement Examples

Transition / Conversion

For aviators a transition is when they fly a different type of aircraft i.e. helicopter to fixed wing. A conversion is when they change to a different model but fly the same type aircraft i.e. a different helicopter. The latest transition / conversion MARADMIN states that it "seeks applications from those *motivated professionals*,"... "who desire to broaden and challenge themselves"... "select individuals will facilitate the interchange of *professional and tactical expertise* within Marine Corps aviation as well as assist HQMC in balancing inventories"¹

HMX-1

HMX-1 is the presidential helicopter squadron whose mission is to support the President of the United States. "The experience gained from such an assignment can make a *meaningful contribution* to a Marine's *career development pattern*"... "An assignment with HMX-1 is one of high visibility and *great responsibility*, and all Marines assigned to HMX-1 must meet specific and *very stringent criteria*." Pilots also must have a minimum of 1500 flight hours.²

¹ MARADMIN 579/08 FY-09 TRANSITION/CONVERSION TRAINING FOR MARINE NAVAL AVIATORS AND NAVAL FLIGHT OFFICERS

² MCO 1326.7E SELECTION AND SCREENING CRITERIA FOR MARINES ASSIGNED TO HMX-1 (2007)

FAO / RAO

"Through a combination of graduate education, language training, and in-country training, the FAO training program produces officers with linguistic, and cultural expertise in specific geographical regions," and that "FAO training prepares officers for duty with the MEF and *high level* USMC, *joint*, or *combined* staffs in operations /planning billets or intel billets with defense intel agencies including duty with the defense attaché system." ³

Conventional Path (current requirements)

A conventional path for an aviator traditionally (by hearsay only, rather than Marine Corps order) begins with earning MOS credibility through flight leadership and experience in the cockpit as a captain and major. This flight leadership and experience must be in the operating forces and not in a training command such as flight school. An officer is expected to do an operating forces tour, followed by a supporting command tour as a captain. As a major, one is expected to serve in a department head billet in the operating forces in the role of executive officer, operations officer, or aviation maintenance

³ MARADMIN 026/06 FY07 FOREIGN AREA OFFICER (FAO) AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS OFFICER (RAO) SELECTION BOARD

officer followed by a supporting command tour in a joint billet also as a major all lasting an average of four years prior to consideration for lieutenant colonel.⁴ Flight leadership is an aviator's best gauge to measure performance and experience other than fitness reports. These tours are usually split between time in a resident PME school or a tour out of the cockpit. If the aviator does a tour with the ground combat element (GCE) as an air officer (AO) or forward air controller (FAC) he or she is considered a well-rounded MAGTF officer. This guidance is given to young aviators early in their careers. Staying in the cockpit without a career-diversifying tour with the GCE is considered ill-advised for career progression. An officer cannot fit fleet operations, gaining credibility, support tour, and PME while choosing a specialty program.

Career gamble: specialized non-conventional vs. conventional

Just as the promotion board is looking for the best and most fully qualified Marine officers, so too are the directors/commanders of specialized non-conventional career options. Never the less, since the impact on those officers may be detrimental to their career, 'best' actually may not applied. On a larger scale, some career paths could gain such a

⁴ LtCol Thomas Weidley, *Manpower Management Officer Assignments FY-09 "Road Show" Information Brief (ppt 2008)*

reputation as career detriment that these programs have problems getting enough applicants and are forced to settle for lesser qualified prospects and/or may have manning difficulties.

For example, the acquisition field suffered enough regarding retention and promotion difficulties that the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act now governs the acquisition field's promotion rate. When it became clear that the acquisition specialty was not being included and it was to the Marine Corps own detriment the promotion board latitude to pass over such officers was restricted.⁵ According to the Secretary of the Navy, all assignments are important to the Marine Corps, and successful performance of assigned duties is the key in measuring an officer's potential for promotion.⁶

If every job is important the question remains; what is best and most fully qualified? Those passed over will say that performance criteria for promotion are not clear enough. In the case of HMX-1, is flying the Commander in Chief less important than combat? Unfortunately the Marine Corps has not established an expected or preferred career pattern for officers of the

⁵ Daniel Stimpson, *Career Officers Need Not Apply* (Marine Corps Gazette; Aug 2006)

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, PRECEPT CONVENING THE FY10 LIEUTENANT COLONEL SELECTION BOARD (From Secretary of the Navy 28 Aug 2008)

Regular or Reserve Component per the guidance of the Secretary of the Navy to the last Lieutenant Colonel promotion board. "In your deliberations you should consider that assignments are made in the best interests of the Marine Corps. Officers rarely have direct influence over their assignments."⁷ Additionally "you should also consider that the Marine Corps benefits when the officer corps possesses a broad spectrum of experience such as foreign language proficiency and cultural awareness."⁸ Hence, assignments to the operating forces, recruiting duty, equal opportunity duty, joint and external billets, billets requiring language proficiency such as international exchange tours and FAO / RAO tours, the (SEP) or the Advance Degree Program (ADP), the training community and support establishment, *all contribute to the depth and breadth of experiences that are critical to the Marine Corps.*⁹ In determining the qualifications for promotion of any officer, *equal weight* should be given to performance in all assigned billets. Yet in the manpower management and assignments brief "A SEP or FAO assignment can take an officer out of their MOS and out of the operating forces for up to five years so it is important to consider the timing of these

⁷ Ibid

⁸ PRECEPT CONVENING THE FY10 LIEUTENANT COLONEL SELECTION BOARD (From Secretary of the Navy 28 Aug 2008)

⁹ Ibid

assignments to maintain MOS credibility".¹⁰ Similarly in regard to a conversion / transition for a Naval Aviator, "Applicants are reminded to consider all career implications prior to application"¹¹ The cost incurred by the Marine Corps promotion board blindness is difficult to measure though no less real.¹² This is clearly a disconnect.

The acquisitions field was measured and fixed, other fields will as well and eventually there will be a new paragraph in the guidance to the boards encompassing every career path option to be considered with the same amount of importance.

Conclusion

For most officers questions are always present when it comes to career progression and career choices: what do I have to do, what shouldn't I do, and where is it written or how is it measured. This leads to the epiphany that performance criteria for promotion is not clear enough. Current career progression for top performing officers who want to choose specialized or

¹⁰ LtCol Thomas Weidley, *Manpower Management Officer Assignments FY-09 "Road Show" Information Brief (ppt 2008)*

¹¹ MARADMIN 579/08 FY-09 TRANSITION/CONVERSION TRAINING FOR MARINE NAVAL AVIATORS AND NAVAL FLIGHT OFFICERS (2008)

¹² Daniel Stimpson, *Career Officers Need Not Apply* (Marine Corps Gazette; Aug 2006)

non-conventional career paths retains an element of risk. Moreover special areas or providers of non-conventional career options have to realize and anticipate that these issues could create potential manning dilemmas. Neither the Marine Corps nor the Department of Defense have designated specific career paths as detrimental to promotion. Ultimately, officers today have only hearsay and experience on which to base their career decisions. Each promotion board consists of different members with their own personal biases, so criteria for promotion may be interpreted differently. Therefore, uniformity at a promotion board may be virtually impossible.

It is recommend that officers weigh pros and cons of their career decisions, and know that there may be risks involved. The argument it there should be no risk as long as an officer is a top performer. The problem lies in the hands of the unclear promotion system.

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